

I am sure some of you remember former United States Senator John Ashcroft, who also served as Attorney General during the George W. Bush Administration. A story has been told about his father, J. Robert Ashcroft. I don't know if this tale is true, however, it provides a great illustration.

According to the story, in January of 1995, J. Robert Ashcroft had fewer than forty-eight hours to live and he was holding on to life, hoping to see his son, John, sworn in as a US Senator the following day. As his family and friends gathered around, J. Robert Ashcroft asked his son to play the piano while everyone sang, "We Are Standing On Holy Ground." After the song, the frail old man spoke some powerful words, saying, "John, I want you to know that even Washington can be holy ground. Wherever you hear the voice of God, that ground is sanctified. It's a place where God can **call** you to serve him. Wherever we are in our vocation.....that place is a holy place of service for God."

Called! It is one of the great biblical themes. God calls! And all who follow Jesus are **called**. Wherever we are in our vocation, whatever we are doing with our lives, God calls **us**. Even in a place like Washington, DC. **Even** in places like Okemos, Haslett, Williamston, East Lansing, Perry, Mason, Holt, Laingsburg, Owosso, Dansville, DeWitt, Grand Ledge,

Charlotte, Eaton Rapids, St. Johns, and Lansing, MI. Even in the most **unlikely** of places and situations, God **calls** us, and that place is a holy place of service for God. It is holy ground.

In today's gospel reading, we hear the call stories of Simon, Andrew, James, and John. All these men were fishermen. Now, at that point in time, fishing was **not** a relaxing, easy job. It was hard, difficult, dirty work. There was nothing easy about it. Anyway, as we meet up with Jesus in today's reading, we find him walking beside the lake one afternoon and he sees these four fishermen busily working. Two are trying to catch fish and two are mending their nets. As he walks by, Jesus disrupts what they are doing and says to each of them, "Follow me."

Truthfully, the response of the four men makes me wonder. Their response is rather hard to believe, because Jesus essentially offers them a job with no pay when he says, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Jesus does not say, "Come, follow me, and make more money than you could ever make fishing." I could understand a response to that summons. But no. Jesus' call and the response of the four really seems implausible. And yet, the gospel reading today says they **immediately** dropped their nets, they **immediately** dropped what they were doing to head off to God-knows-where, to lives that were uncertain and a life they

could not begin to imagine! The disciples' immediate acceptance of Jesus' unusual invitation is a dramatic, life changing encounter. Jesus comes along, disrupts their lives, and summons them **from** the fabric of family relationships. He summons them **from** the midst of the workaday world. And he calls them **into** a **new** set of relationships and a **new** vocation. I must say, this is one big, heavy duty fish story!!

Many of us, throughout life, face big decisions about family, about jobs, about faith. There are times in our lives when we stand at a fork in the road and must make decisions. Sometimes, there are experiences in our lives when we need to take risks. And there are even times in our lives when we must **sacrifice** something to follow Jesus. But chances are that for most of us, the situation will **never** be as dramatic as it was for these four disciples. It is not very often that we drop **everything** to start a new life. And yet, the call is the same for each one of us. Jesus comes along, disrupts **our** lives, and summons **us** from the fabric of family relationships. He summons **us** from the midst of the workaday world. And he calls **us** into a new set of relationships, a new vocation.

God calls us, each in our own setting, to repent, to turn in a new direction, to open our lives to a radical renewal that may upset and re-orient our neat little, hard-won patterns of comfort and familiarity. God calls each

of us to follow and open our lives to a radical change that will upset our unquestioned assumptions and the privilege we enjoy without even being aware of it. Just how willing **are** we to have our lives turned upside down in order to follow this Jesus? Truthfully, we might have questions about such a call, a call where Jesus **disrupts** what we are doing and seemingly calls us to abandon family and occupation.

Well, I really don't think Jesus asks us to **abandon** family or work. **But** God calls us to live differently **within** those relationships. Our work and family life are **transformed** when God calls us to follow. The disruption in our lives and the call to follow is **not** to destroy, but to renew, and our lives are transformed in the process.

And yet, the call to follow **does** mean leaving something behind. Following Jesus means letting go of old securities and certainties and trusting the God who promises to be with us **wherever** we go. It means leaving behind that which has enslaved us, leaving behind that which controls us, letting go of the fear that imprisons us, and letting go of our **need** to control. And the call to follow Jesus means letting go of self-centeredness, that intense focus on self. Remember what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Following Jesus means living a **countercultural** life and **dying to**

self as we are summoned from life's easy ruts of comfort and safety to enter the future without knowing exactly where we are headed. Yes, we do leave something behind. But the call to follow means finding security in a **new** place. When we follow Jesus, it means we live our life under new management as Jesus becomes Lord of our life. To be called means we are invited into a relationship with **Jesus**, and that relationship is **all** about love, grace, and compassion. To follow Jesus means being led by the one who frees us, who embraces us, and who lovingly claims us as God's own.

And what we will find out as we follow Jesus, is that living in relationship with him connects us to a whole new set of relationships. Jesus not only calls us, but then sends us out to be fishers of people. We will find that the grace that calls us and the love that invites us leads us to new places in life, and that means we will form some **new**, even **unlikely** relationships – sometimes relationships with people we would otherwise never meet. We will find that, just as the disciples were sent, we, too, will be sent to fish for people, carrying God's message of love and proclaiming the good news of a gracious God to a hurting, broken world. And there is **nothing** more sacred than carrying and proclaiming that news. There is **nothing** more sacred than walking with people through life's painful times and sharing God's good news of grace. There is **nothing** more sacred

than walking with people through the tough, challenging times of life, and sharing the good news of God's love. Yes, it is **grace** that calls us, **love** that invites us, and it is **compassion** that moves us and takes us forth to do this work of discipleship. And, wherever we are called to serve, we will find ourselves in a sacred place, we will find ourselves on holy ground.

Even as we work with the former residents of Knob Hill apartments, as we work with the refugees in our care, as we gather food for the hungry and daily stock the pantries, as we sit with people in the hospital, as we hold the hands of the dying, as we have coffee with someone who is hurting, as we sit behind our desks at work and interact with our colleagues, as we do the work of advocacy and seek justice for the most vulnerable in this world.

I think that is precisely what J. Robert Ashcroft was trying to communicate to his son, John. God calls us every hour of every day, **wherever** we find ourselves, to share the good news of **God's love** in a broken world. That is the call, the vocation, and the mission of each one of us! And when we do this, we stand on holy ground.